



# CARING FOR AGING PARENTS

If you had to name the fastest-growing age bracket in the United States today, would you be thinking of babies? Adolescents? Young adults, perhaps?

Think again. According to a special report<sup>1</sup> published by Harvard Medical School, 85-94 year olds are the fastest growing segment of the population. In second place are those aged 95 and older. In fact, the average American now lives nearly thirty years longer than just a century ago.

For those of us with aging parents, that means our parents will be leading longer, healthier, more productive lives. But it also means a far greater chance that they will need help caring for themselves.

## Emotions and Decisions

Taking responsibility for our parents' care means grappling with powerful emotions and difficult decisions. What can our parents expect of us? What can we expect of them? How can we juggle the many demands and stresses of this new and unfamiliar situation while maintaining our own independence?

Here are some strategies that may be helpful in coping with these questions:

- *Talk about the issues now* – It's best to begin the process of talking to your aging parents as early as possible, *before* a crisis. Planning and open communication can help you confront the challenges of caring for your parents while continuing to focus on your own issues and those of your own family. Inform them of available options and resources, and encourage them to discuss sensitive matters when they seem interested in doing so.
- *Concentrate on the quality of your relationship* – The care giving process can strengthen the family and bridge gaps. Strive to accept differences in attitudes and values between yourself and your parents. *Listen* to them and encourage them without giving advice – leave counseling to the professionals. Recognize their special relationship with their grandchildren.
- *Take care of yourself* – Nourish your own independence, and avoid becoming overly immersed in your parents' daily activities. Consider seeking a caregiver support group.
- *Seek resources* – There are many sources of reliable, accurate, up-to-date information that can help you meet your eldercare needs and plan ahead for long-term care giving. One excellent source is the Eldercare Locator a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging (<http://www.eldercare.gov/Eldercare/Public/Home.asp> or (800) 677-1116). Another is the Family Caregiver Alliance (<http://www.caregiver.org> or (800) 445-8106). Many more can be found by typing "eldercare resources" into your favorite Web search engine.

Your EAP can also provide you with help accessing available resources and referrals to pre-screened elder care providers and facilities.

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Medical School. *Living Better, Living Longer: The Secrets of Healthy Aging*. Harvard Health Publications: Boston, 2001